

A364 In die cinerum

St. Vincent Ferrer Sermon - On Ash Wednesday

Mt 6:16-18

16 And when you fast, be not as the hypocrites, sad. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest anoint thy head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not to men to fast, but to thy Father who is in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret, will repay thee.

"But you, when you fast anoint your head, and wash your face..."(Mt 6:17ff)

That which above all in this moral life is especially necessary for us for the remission of sins and the pursuit of the kingdom of heaven, is penitence. Nor do we have any other remedy for sins committed after baptism.

Note the similarity to a sailor undergoing shipwreck, after which the sailors have no other life saver except to place themselves on some planks and firmly hang on, otherwise... So it is with us. For the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the great captain, has built a beautiful ship for sailing safely to paradise, namely baptismal innocence. And whoever rightly sails with this, like the Blessed Virgin, arrives at paradise and to its gates. Of this ship according to the spiritual sense of the [scriptural] authority, "And when he entered into the boat," that is, baptism," his disciples," that is Christians, "followed him," (Mt 8:23). This ship, baptismal innocence, has suffered shipwreck, and has been broken, wrecked upon the rocks of mortal sins, from the winds of diabolic temptations or the waves of carnal inclinations, or the dangers of worldly occupations, to the extent that there are so many dangers in the sea of this world that in ten thousand souls not one makes it with this ship of baptismal innocence, without sinning mortally, and so is wrecked. So, like sailors, if they are willing to cling firmly to the flotsam of penitence, they might yet survive. All the doctors say this, and the theologians, and canonists and lawyers are saying that penance is the second plank after shipwreck.

But why is it called the second plank? What is first? For an answer note that there are two shipwrecks in human nature, and the first is general, the second particular. The first shipwreck was [the loss] of original justice from the sin of Adam, for then the ship of original justice was wrecked and all in it were drowned. Authority: "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned," (Rom. 5:12). For this reason, so that all can be saved, God ordained two planks, and the first was baptism, the second, penance. Thus penance is called the second plank. But if we wish to speak of the special or particular shipwreck, which happens when you or another sin mortally, then penance is called the first plank and not the second, because we do not have another remedy for salvation. Thus Christ said, "I say to you: but unless you shall do penance, you shall all likewise perish," (Lk 13:3). So penance is necessary for us. In the sermon theme Christ shows us how it is to be done, saying, "when you fast, anoint...etc."

Christ shows us three necessary things, which we should be busy about at this time, if we wish to be saved with the plank of penance. This is subtly understood in the theme.

First is penitential affliction (*afflictio penitentialis*), where, "When you fast,"
Second, spiritual prayer (*oratio spiritualis*), where "Anoint your head."
Third is sacramental confession (*confessio sacramentalis*), where, "Wash your face."

PENANCE

I say first, etc. when it is said, "When you fast, etc." It must be known, however, that Christ and holy mother the Church which orders this fast, that the fast is an affliction for those who are not accustomed to fast. I say, therefore, "when you fast," presuming that all Christians fast, beginning today, from this day up to Easter, except for the six Sundays. And so there are forty fast days, and so by fasting we are conformed to Christ like good disciples and good ministers to our Lord, who for us fasted for forty days. Thus the Apostle, "In all things let us exhibit ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, ... in fastings," (2 Cor. 6:4-5). Note the word when he says "in much patience," because with much patience the affliction of such fasting is accomplished, by conforming us to our Lord Jesus Christ. And first [patience] with ourselves, second with our neighbors, third in our own house.

First, because you are not accustomed to fast, in the beginning it is difficult for you, because the first thing in the morning your stomach growls "I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry," and a headache follows. Then, because you have not eaten, you find it hard to sleep, and so patience is necessary for yourself, because in this consists merit. Nor because of this should you stop fasting, remembering that Christ endured much for you, and your sins have deserved much. So, to the extent that you diligently observe a diet for your physical health, you should the more so keep the diet ordained by Christ for the health of your soul, lest it happen to you like the fearful soldiers, who in the center of the battle when they hear the cannons, are terrified and then retreat, when they should be more aggressive and fight more fiercely.

Second, it is necessary to be patient with our neighbors. For some clergy because of their fasting become impatient. Even when someone speak to them politely, they react with anger. Thus patience is necessary, otherwise the fast would become diabolical, if one would fast always, but impatiently and with malice.

Third, it is necessary that you be patient in your own home. If for example, when you come home for dinner, and the dinner is not ready, you should not be indignant with your wife or family, but patiently wait and in the meantime say a prayer, and if dinner is overcooked or less well prepared, hold your patience and don't throw the plate at your wife's head. Behold why "in much patience." Sacred scripture concurs: "For patience is necessary for you," supply, fasting, "that, doing the will of God," i.e. fasting, "you may receive the promise," (Heb. 10:36). Note, "in much fastings," namely forty days as he said.

Now there arise three questions which you commonly ask. And the first is of those saying: I have already fasted three or four Lents, or even ten, and you always are saying that Lent happens after the example of Christ who fasted only one forty-day period, why therefore, do we fast for forty days every year? Since Christ did not fast but once in his

life, especially because he said, "The disciple is not above the master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord," (Mt 10:24f)? For the answer note that this question proceeds from the ignorance of not considering the fact of Jesus Christ. How do you believe that Christ fasted those forty days? Some simple folks would say that Christ fasted as we fast, eating once in the day etc. Others say that Christ took with him forty loaves of bread into the desert, and each day ate one. This is wrong. Some say that he was eating herbs, and this is false. Behold what the text of the gospel says. He fasted forty days in the desert, "And he ate nothing in those days," (Lk. 3:2). Now if you wish to fast one Lent in that way, and to endure a forty day period like that, I give you permission, lest you fast any other way. For Christ, his entire life was like the Lent which we observe, because he would eat only once in the day, and nowhere do we read that he ate meat, except the paschal lamb, to fulfill the law. Because, therefore, we cannot be compared to him in this kind of fasting; because we are not able to go for forty days without food, thus holy mother the Church in ordering our fast takes the number forty days from Christ, namely forty in general. And in a general way, from his ordinary way of living, according the Master of History, we now receive the manner of our annual fast, namely eating only once in the day, not meat, but Lenten food, because every action of Christ is an instruction, as Gregory says. Also, "... Jesus began to do and to teach," (Acts 1:1).

The second question is whether some are exempt from this fast? I respond that many persons are excused because neither God nor holy mother the Church intends to oblige someone to the impossible, or to put someone in danger. So you ask what kind of people are exempted? I submit that, according to the theologians, there are eight kinds of people who are dispensed from this fast.

- The first exempted are pregnant women The reason is that such women have to provide for two persons, themselves and their son or daughter, because if they were to fast, the creation growing in their womb could be severely weakened and would not live long. Thus they can eat without sin. But if the woman is healthy and hearty, she can fast a little.

- Second, women breastfeeding are excused for the same reason as above.

- Third the sick are excused, not sick of any illness whosoever, but only of those which take away the appetite, lest they might be deprived of a good meal even once. Not [dispensed] are gout-sufferers, or the wounded and such illness, which do not disturb the appetite, and from indigestion, [de gutta] which results from excessive food and drink etc. They do not excuse.

- Fourth, the poor, who at supper time do not have enough food, like those who beg at the door or others who have nothing or barely some cabbage with oil. If such can fast, they would have great merit, but they are not obliged. About this see St. Thomas [Summa] II-II q. 118. The rich, however who are able to have fish and other such foods are bound to fast.

- Fifth, those journeying on foot, because of necessity; those on horseback are not excused; the horse or the mule can eat, but you can't without sinning.

- Sixth, laborers or miners, construction workers, who in whole or in part can't, and who otherwise could not provide for their wives and children. Seamstresses however and tailors, clerks and the like who do their work sitting down are not excused.

- Seventh, children. But of what age? St. Thomas in IV Sent. and in [II-II, q. 147](#), says that not all are bound to fast. Children may even be excused, who have not yet completed 21 years. The reason, because up to that time the body is building, and children are growing. Such children need at least two meals [a day]. One for sustaining life, and the other for bodily growth. So I give you this advice for children seven or eight years old, it is enough that they fast on Good Friday. Others who are older, if eleven or twelve years old, once in the week and so on for the others.

- Eighth, old folks of a certain age. When they have lost their appetite for eating or because they have lost their teeth, they should eat often or more often, like children. But old folks, eighty years old or even older, who once could eat well, are not excused in some of the above lest they sin mortally.

Therefore we all should fast with diligence. Otherwise if they are not excused for one of the aforesaid reasons, they sin mortally because they transgress the ecclesiastical precept, about which De Conse. di. 3. *It is not permitted*, and chap. *It is not necessary* and chap. *It pleases*. Thus the response to the second question is clear. So it is said, "And all the people cried to the Lord with great earnestness, and they humbled their souls in fastings, and prayers, both they and their wives," (Judith 4:8).

The third question posed by some, and especially by rich people, asks if they can redeem their fasting through alms, or commute their obligation, saying since there are three penitential works, namely fasting, prayer and almsgiving, and fasting is the least of the works, so these say, they may commute a lesser good into a greater good, i.e. fasting into almsgiving, and on their own, by their own authority and without permission commute [their obligation to fast]. But they are not excused by this. Note, as a response, just because simply speaking, all things being equal, almsgiving is better than fasting, but on the other hand I say that obedience is better than fasting, prayer and almsgiving, "For obedience is better than sacrifices," (1 Kgs. 15). So, on this account, if you would give all that you possess in alms for the love of God, and by your own authority you break your fast, against obedience, all would be lost. Because the universal Church ordains this fast, obedience to her should be observed. So Christ says to the keepers of the Church, "He that hears you, hears me; and he that despises you, despises me," (Lk 10:16). If therefore you have any need, you should go to the pastor, and if by chance the pastor is not certain of your need, you should consult the doctor, and if the doctor advises not to fast, with the advice and permission of the doctor and the pastor you can replace fasting with almsgiving, otherwise not.

PRAYER

I say secondly, etc. that the task which we should now be occupied and doing is spiritual prayer, when he says, "Anoint your head." And it is understood that in sacred scripture we find that Christ is the head of the Church, both militant and triumphant. The reason is because like the head, he is above and generally influences the members. St. Thomas beautifully defines this in [III q. 8](#) and in III Sent. dist. 13. And the doctors in the same dist. 3. [Scriptural] authority: "And he has subjected all things under his feet, and has made him head over all the church, which is his body," (Eph. 1:22f). Note: "all things," namely universals and particulars. Therefore the Apostle says, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ," (1 Cor. 11:3). By spiritual prayer this head, namely Christ, is anointed, which softens him and renders him gentle to sinners. You know that anointing softens and makes anointed skin smooth, although it was rough before. So Christ, to the extent that he might have seemed to be harsh and strict to sinners, by spiritual prayer is rendered soft and gentle. St. Bernard: "Prayer anoints [ungit] God, tears pierce [compungit] him." And so the Lord Jesus Christ, who in his fleshly time, is hard and strict because of our sins, and through the rigor of his justice, if now in this holy time is anointed with devout prayers, he becomes gentle and soft. And by this oil he wishes to be anointed, because it pleases him much. And note this parable which he told about himself: "Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened to a king, who would take an account of his servants. And when he had begun to take the account, one was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents. And as he had not wherewith to pay it, his lord commanded that he should be sold," (Mt 18:23-25). That worthless servant began to anoint his head with the oil of prayer saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all," (v. 26). up to "because you asked me"

And the lord of that servant being moved with pity, let him go and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that servant was gone out, he found one of his fellow servants that owed him an hundred pence: and laying hold of him, throttled him, saying: Pay what thou owest. 29 And his fellow servant falling down, besought him, saying: **Have patience with me**, and I will pay thee all. 30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he paid the debt. 31 Now his fellow servants seeing what was done, were very much grieved, and they came and told their lord all that was done. 32 Then his lord called him; and said to him: Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all the debt, **because you asked me**:

In this parable Christ is speaking about himself, who is the Lord and our King. We are the servants and must render to him an account, how we have dealt with thoughts, words, deeds and all are obligated to "ten thousand," which ten are the commandments in which are included all the perfections of this life. We by sinning are obliged to satisfaction. If therefore you wish that your debt be dismissed to you, anoint his head, namely of Christ. If you wish to know the manner of anointing, look to Mary Magdalen, about whom it is said, "There came to him a woman having an alabaster box of precious ointment, and poured it on his head as he was at table," (Mt 20:7).

Here is shown three ways for those who are serving in devout prayer:

- The first way is when he says "There came to him a woman," that is, a devout soul, thinking devoutly when one is saying when he says "Our Father who art etc.."

- The second way is when it is said "having an alabaster box," that is a body of precious ointment, namely reverential fear.

- The third way is where it says "and poured it on his head," and this is when the mouth is opened, saying devoutly the words of a prayer. And just as Mary Magdalen twice anointed Christ, so you twice a day ought to anoint Christ, devoutly praying, in the morning and in the evening. Behold therefore why he says, "Anoint your head, etc." And this for the second part.

CONFESSION

Third: I say that the third work which we should occupy ourselves in this holy time is sacramental confession, when he says, "and wash your face, etc." Conscience is the face of the soul. Reason: Because just as in the face we recognize the person, so God in the face recognizes who are his disciples. And of this face David speaks saying in Psalm 26:8, "My heart has spoken to you, my face has sought you," that is, the conscience. This face is washed now through sacramental confession. O who washes the face of his body only once a year? How much dirt and grime would it have! So it is of the face of conscience. This washing was prefigured in 4 Kgs. 4:5, where God prefigured the necessity of confession in the leper Naaman. And note, briefly the story when Elisha the prophet said, "Go, and wash seven times in the Jordan, and thy flesh shall recover health, and you shall be clean." Note that leprosy stands for mortal sin. And note, that the leper has the effects of every mortal sin.

- First, because the leprosy makes a man swell. See here the effects of the sin of pride.
- Second, it induces a great thirst, through which is symbolized the sin of avarice.
- Third, it infects those living with him. Behold the effects of the sin of lust.
- Fourth, it dehydrates. Behold here, envy.
- Fifth, it makes the breath smell bad. Behold here the effects of gluttony.
- Sixth, it makes the voice hoarse. Behold here the effects of anger.
- Seventh, it weakens all the members in their functioning. Behold here the sin of sloth.

Therefore the remedy, the cure, is to go to the Jordan, and the name comes from *Jor*, i.e. river, and *dan*, i.e. judgment. Behold here confession, which is nothing but the river of judgment. For there judgment of sins happen. Here, indeed, a man ought to get undressed, showing all his shames, i.e. naked sins, clearly, to the confessor. So he says "go", namely to the confessor, "to wash seven times", i.e. to confess the seven mortal sins to which all the other sins are reduced. The first time man is washed of the sin of pride, in the second, of avarice, etc. In the seventh, however a man is clean and his face cleansed of all mortal stains, so that, having confessed, none remain to him.

There are some miserable people who choose not to confess their sins. If God had had commanded us to hurl ourselves into a fire for the remission of sins, we should do it. How much more ought we confess, since it is so easy. Thus the servants said to Naaman, "If the prophet had bid you do some great thing, surely you should have done it. How

much rather what he now has said to you: Wash, and you shall be clean?" (4 Kgs. 5:13). If it were possible, all of you ought to confess already today, that you might participate in the church's blessings. Thus John says, agreeing with the aforesaid image, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity," (1 John 1:9). Now you know what you should be doing in this holy time [of Lent].